

**From:** Marc van der Erve PhD  
**To:** Microsoft ATR, jeremy.wagstaff@dowjones.com@inetgw  
**Date:** 12/12/01 9:14am  
**Subject:** Microsoft bashing - A customer's perspective

Dear Jeremy,

I read The WallStreet Journal daily and glance through your column regularly. I am one of the silent majority that you have ridiculed into reacting to relentless and, in my view, unfair bashing of Microsoft (i.e. both by media and courts on both sides of the Atlantic).

My compliments for getting me out of my hole, though! Indeed, your column is striking a chord but, I believe, a false one! Although Microsoft does not need my help at all, I would like to make the following sobering points knowing that I have no time to generate the detail needed for a court case.

For whatever the customer's view is worth to you, here is my perspective.

#### MS's ADDED VALUE IS IN HANDLING COMPLEXITY

I recognize some of the problems that you are referring to but they have largely been resolved in later versions, such as Windows Professional 2000 and XP.

The referral to other suppliers with similar, witty, but generally not better software "toys" has been symptomatic in "reviews" like yours. But, in doing so, you are forgetting one important thing! The true benefit to customers is not only in userfriendliness but also in managing the complexity of their tasks. For example, although I might fancy the presentation of an odd diary application over that of Outlook, Outlook as part of an highly integrated suite grandly improves my effectiveness as a user. The added value of Microsoft to the user (and to the economy at large as so many of us are using MS products) is in its handling of the increasing complexity of tasks, data and communications. Hence, the suite of highly integrated MS systems can only be complex in itself and, as a result, can only be more error prone than independent toys. However, the net benefit of using Microsoft's products by far exceeds some of the adverse situations that might occur.

The ways in which MS deals with individual customers by far outshine those of other suppliers when it comes to support. I have had grave experiences with the software from IBM and Ericsson (Symbian) which compared to the true plug-and-play features of MS are plainly irritating. Many of my investments in non-MS software-driven products have gone down the drain because either the products did not work or the support provided was either not there or clumsy to say the least.

In my book, Tablets of Light (Laws of the Networked Society), in the chapter on EVOLUTION, I refer to Microsoft when I discuss its "ability

to adapt," i.e. based on its capacity to listen and react constructively to customers. Having studied behavior, organizations and complexity at large, I am personally amazed as to how MS has been able to maintain and improve its responsiveness.

#### MS IS FACILITATOR OF INNOVATION

Indeed, MS is not necessarily known for its inventions but above all for its capacity to refine and commercialize products. Many of the features built into its software have been obtained and licensed from smaller, best-in-class innovators on the market. In that light, MS actually triggers and supports innovation as it provides a market to those who manage to invent the ultimate. Of course, in order to manage complexity, MS must adhere to a certain architecture which is why MS requires that architectural requirements are met. Still, the architecture of MS is mutating as new features and inventions see the light through the eyes of independent entrepreneurs and software developers. Of course, as you observed in XP, whenever the management of complexity is hindered by foreign applications, the performance of a system may degenerate gradually. I am sure that as part of your research, you must have been loading a lot of software on your system with understandable consequences. In other words, it is in the interest (and the responsibility) of the customer to help maintain an environment on his system which manages complexity well.

In a more interactive economy, competition changes from a one-to-one bull fight for supremacy to the "generation of variety." Variety brings with it the chance that one or a few variations will fit the needs of an unpredictably evolving market. Traditional competitors, such as Sun, IBM and others, are competitors no longer if they do not bring innovative products to the table. MS, as any other business, is best served by an increasing variety of product inventions which they are eager to include if the customer so desires. Variety indeed remains an impetus for improvement.

I don't think the above is new to you. Hence, as bashing MS is "in" today, any media and judicial attention seems superstitiously opportunistic and not always beneficial to the interest of customers. Most of the noise made in Europe and the US can be led back to competitive barriers that are caving as a result of the irresistible product offerings of MS and, above all, the lack of innovativeness of established industries. In that sense, I am not at all proud of being a European! Although, many innovative ideas can be found in the organizations of established industries, only a few succeed to bring them to the market. Sometimes, these companies may pull it off once, but they fail in creating an environment (like that of MS) which absorbs new inputs and mutates products and services continuously.

By all means, competition is essential to innovation and progress (progress generally equivalent to the increasing complexity of natural

and virtual life forms). However, competition should be driven by variety not bashing!

Last, but not least, what a joy is it to work with XP, i.e. its impeccable communications (ADSL), its handling and printing of pictures, etc! I was pleased to read in an earlier column that your sons seemed to judge the MS character differently as they could not part from the X-Box. Or, was it another columnist?

Kind regards,

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